

Lessons I Learned as a Source Selection Authority (SSA)

Introduction: These lessons learned are from my experience as the SSA for three major source selections for the Exploration Mission Directorate's Constellation Program. All three of these acquisitions were for the development and production of human space flight hardware; the Orion Space Vehicle, the Ares 1 Upper Stage and the Ares 1 Upper Stage Avionics. These lessons learned are intended to be helpful information for an SSA to understand and perform their role and responsibilities in making important and well-informed selection decisions for NASA. These are not mandatory requirements but good ideas meant to help an SSA make a contractor selection with the confidence that he or she has made the best possible choice that provides the best value for NASA. The SSA is a weighty responsibility and leaves NASA with a decision that will affect the Agency for many years to come. The decision could have a dramatic impact on the success or failure of the program or project. These points that follow may not seem profound, but are worth thinking about early in the source selection process. Otherwise the SSA may be faced with a decision at the end of the process, when the Source Evaluation Board (SEB) has given its final presentation, and the SSA feels that he really wishes he had more time and information. Another purpose is to run a clean, objective process that cannot be disputed, and that maximizes competition.

Suggestions:

1. Take time to learn the process if you have not done it before.
2. Rely on good procurement specialists and legal advisors to make sure you handle it properly. This may be difficult for an engineer or scientist to contemplate, but it is important.
3. Attend and participate in the Procurement Strategy Meeting (PSM). Make sure you are comfortable with the requirement and the strategy to acquire this requirement. It is also important that you understand how the selection process works, as well as the proposed contract structure. You will start to get to know the SEB chair and the Contracting Officer from this PSM as they normally conduct briefings to the PSM.
4. Pick advisors that you trust. You should include the person(s) (the Project and Program Manager), who will live with your decision. You should have key members representing, S&MA, Chief Engineer, Legal, Procurement, Small Business, as well as trusted technical experts. Ensure that the SEB Chair is provided with the names of all experts and advisors you plan to use; to prevent potential conflicts of interest.
5. Take time to visit the SEB team and read proposals. These visits are most important.
 - a. Choose a time after proposals have been submitted and the SEB team has had a chance to digest. This visit should be before the meeting where the "Competitive Range" decision is made.
 - b. Read the proposals at a top level. The "Mission Suitability" part of the proposal as well as "Key Personnel" is important to read through. It gives

a good sense of the technical depth and the credibility of the proposal. Look at process diagrams and drawings. You get a view of the forest, while the SEB is scrutinizing the trees. You can identify potential issues you see and develop questions you want the SEB to answer. These can potentially feed into topics for the “Discussions” the SEB will enter into with the offerors.

- c. If you see that the SEB is struggling with the evaluation of particular areas in the proposals request that they seek help or help them find the subject matter experts (SME) they need to resolve the issue(s). Remember to notify the SEB as early as possible to coordinate the SME’s visit to ensure they can obtain copies of proposals. (Also See Item h. below.)
 - d. The SEB can brief you on where they stand on evaluating cost and small business, without you trying to sort through all the details. The SEB should also give you a sense of the technical approaches of the offerors. They can provide their thoughts on potential technical issues they have identified. You can press them to look into issues you think need more scrutiny.
 - e. You should not try to get the SEB members to offer judgments or make recommendations. They are providing the findings that feed the decision process. You want to keep the roles clear and the process clean.
 - f. Visit the team again after “Discussions” and the time the SEB gets the final proposal revisions (FPR) back. Go through the same process. This is also a good time to get a sense of the interactions between the Offerors and the SEB team. Obviously this has to be before final selections.
 - g. Spend most of the time reading. This may take a day or day and a half. You should have an initial short orientation meeting with the SEB, to get their initial assessment and to try to understand the organization of the offeror’s proposals to make the SSA’s review more efficient. After reading the proposals, spend a few minutes before leaving to discuss issues that may need further facts. Do not take much of the SEB’s time. They have a lot of work to get through and a tight schedule. It is important that the SSA or any SSA Advisor does not bias the SEB Team while being involved during this time.
 - h. Ask key advisors to also read proposals. You may point them to particular areas, where you want their view, given their experience and expertise. It is important to remember that any advisor/ex-officio brought in during the SEB process shall be cleared by the SEB’s Legal Advisor to ensure that conflicts of interests do not exist. See NFS 1815.370(f) for Ex-Officio Members supporting the SEB. Seek Legal advice if there is a need for any ex-officio/advisors to support the SSA in any SEB matter.
6. Do not meet with the Companies proposing. Obviously, do not discuss the acquisition with any contractors. There is an official blackout period. I think the SSA should impose a blackout period on himself that begins well before the official period. This is the timeframe when all communications regarding the acquisition must go through the Contracting Officer. If you have other business with one of the contractors, go ahead and meet, if it is important to do so. I would

- invite the chief procurement person and/or lawyer to sit in. This protects all involved from any claims of impropriety.
7. All of the evaluation factors are important and must be evaluated. Ensure the SEB team is looking carefully and fairly at all of the offeror's proposals. It is important that there is a consistent and fair treatment of each Offeror's proposal when measured against the evaluation criteria/factors outlined in the acquisition solicitation.
 8. Past Performance is an important factor to be evaluated. The offerors submit their self-evaluation and many times have past performance questionnaires submitted to NASA from Agencies that view them favorably. This will tend to be positive or spun positively. The SEB team should do their own evaluation, seek out information about the Offeror's performance on other contracts that you know the work is similar but for some reason the Offeror may not have submitted it with their proposal. The SEB should perform thorough checks and consider past performance from as many sources as possible. If you hear of examples that should be looked at, feed them to the SEB team.
 9. Maintain the schedule that is laid out. Make sure it is achievable, and strive to keep it on track. It can be dictated by programmatic circumstances.
 10. Use the "Competitive Range" decision point to down-select, where there appears to be a natural break in the competitors. Establish a competitive range comprised of all of the most highly rated proposals. Don't eliminate anyone who is highly rated and who could potentially recover during discussions. Unless there is a good reason, proceed with at least two offerors. This provides for the SEB to focus on the most likely successful bidders, and not spend further time on those who really don't have a chance. It is also a favor to the companies, who can't win, from spending any more time and money on proposals. It also maintains the benefit of competition through the discussion period and into final selections.
 11. At the SEB Presentation/Briefing to the SSA;
 - a. Encourage all advisors to be there.
 - b. Allow enough time for the briefing and appropriate discussion.
 - c. The SSA should lead off the meeting, with appropriate thanks to the team, discussion of importance of the decision and path forward, encouragement to the advisors to ask questions and discuss the importance of their role.
 - d. The SEB presents their findings. The SSA should draw out the important discussions and issues to get the appropriate focus on the apparent discriminators in the selection decision. The SEB should not provide low scores based only on "vague" proposals. If certain areas are not understood, then the SEB should seek clarification before the SEB briefing. Seek advice from your procurement and legal advisors because the regulations (FAR 15.301) limit the types of clarifications that may be addressed.
 - e. There may be a clear winner according to the evaluation factors, and if there are no overriding risks or issues. If it is very close, the time invested by the SSA reading proposals and spending time with the SEB team can be critical in drawing out the discriminators. It is the important for the

SSA to draw out the right level of discussion among the advisors to help him/her think through the discriminators.

- f. It is important for the SSA to understand the trade-off process of mission suitability factor, past performance factor, and the cost/price factor. The SSA should discuss the SEB findings and significant discriminators as well as the trade-offs in the open forum or in private consultation with their Legal Advisor to ensure a well-written and well-documented source selection decision/statement (SSS) can be written by the Legal Advisor and the SEB Team.
 - g. After the presentation, it may be appropriate to clear the room, except for the advisors, Legal, and the SEB chair. Ask the advisors to provide their opinions and rationale.
 - h. If the meeting and discussion have been managed well by the SSA, bringing out the issues and discriminators, there should be near full consensus on what the decision should be. However, consensus is not required. Advisors are not voting members.
12. The SSA has the sole responsibility to make the selection decision. It has to be justifiable. The SSA can disagree with the SEB's assessments, but should have good rationale for doing so. Source selection decision made by the SSA must be a comparative assessment of proposals based upon the evaluation criteria in the solicitation, include the basis for any business judgments and tradeoffs made, and represent the independent judgment of the SSA. The SSS has two different, but related purposes. The first purpose is to demonstrate the SSA made a rational source selection decision. Second, the SSS must be a deliberative document, reflecting the thought process behind the selection if it is to justify the selection.
13. The SSA's decision is reflected in the source selection statement. The source selection statement has to be clear, concise, and consistent. The source selection statement can be released to the public and is used to debrief offerors. A well-written selection statement should explain what occurred during the SEB process and help convince disappointed unsuccessful offerors that no grounds for a sustainable protest exist since the acquisition was conducted properly. The selection statement should be concise and to the point, based on the primary discriminators and not on peripheral factors. Ensure that neutrals also are adequately addressed in the source selection statement. It is important to ensure that every factor and subfactor was evaluated consistent with the solicitation requirements against each offerors proposal. Significant discriminators, including the strengths and weaknesses of each offeror's proposal should be clearly identified and adequately documented in the source selection statement.
14. It's a good idea to have a schedule for the process leading out of the SEB to decision and notifications. These need to be on the appropriate calendars well ahead of time. Even with very extensive advance planning and coordination between the field Centers and HQ, this can take 72 hours or more. With the three procurements we did, we were able to accomplish this set of events in a day and a half, following the SEB briefing, because of the advanced planning and adherence to the approach outlined in these lessons learned. The steps usually scheduled are the ANOSCA, preparation of a press release, development and signing of the

selection statement, and notification of company executives of the successful and unsuccessful offerors. In our case, we had congressional staff briefings, and a press announcement/media event to announce the winner.

- a. Ask the company executives to withhold spreading the announcement until we announce the winner.
- b. Ask the same of the congressional staff.
- c. The media event was scheduled after the close of the stock market for the day.

15. NASA should not conduct a press/media announcement. There should only be a press release. We had press announcements/media events for each of the three contract awards that I was SSA for but we probably should have just put out a news release. At the media event, the primary question will be “Why did A win, and why did B lose?” You can’t even answer that question. The selection statement has not yet gone to the contractor teams, and debriefings as well as the protest period are yet to come. The contractors can do what they want with the media and are not as constrained as the Government in these matters.

/s/

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